Medicon Agriculture & Environmental Sciences
Volume 9 Issue 3 September 2025
Article Type: Short Communication
ISSN: 2972-2691

Agroforestry: A Nature-Based Solution for Elevated Climate Change Impacts in India

S Sarvade*

Department of Forestry, Jawaharlal Nehru Krishi Vishwa Vidyalaya, Jabalpur- 482 004, Madhya Pradesh, India

***Corresponding Author:** S Sarvade, Assistant Professor (Agroforestry), Department of Forestry, Jawaharlal Nehru Krishi Vishwa Vidyalaya, Jabalpur- 482 004, Madhya Pradesh, India.

Received: August 28, 2025; **Published:** September 22, 2025

DOI: 10.55162/MCAES.09.268

Climate change has become one of the most pressing challenges for India in recent decades. With nearly half of its population dependent on agriculture and allied sectors, the impacts of erratic monsoons, rising temperatures, floods, droughts, and land degradation are being felt across rural landscapes. Small and marginal farmers, who constitute the backbone of Indian agriculture, are especially vulnerable as they rely on climate-sensitive resources like rainwater, fertile soil, and natural vegetation. In this context, agroforestry has emerged as a powerful nature-based solution that integrates ecological functions with economic needs, offering both climate mitigation and adaptation benefits to millions of farming households.

Agroforestry in India is not a new concept. Traditional practices such as growing neem, mango, or tamarind trees on field bunds, integrating fodder trees with pasture lands, or cultivating poplar and eucalyptus along with crops in the northwestern plains reflect the deep-rooted understanding that farmers have always had about the value of trees. These systems are now being revisited in the face of climate change, as trees on farmlands provide multiple ecological and livelihood services that purely mono-cropped fields cannot deliver.

One of the major contributions of agroforestry to climate action in India is carbon sequestration. Trees absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store it in their biomass and soil, thereby reducing the net greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture. This becomes significant in a country where agriculture accounts for a large share of methane and nitrous oxide emissions. By integrating species like *Dalbergia sissoo*, *Albizia lebbeck*, or *Leucaena leucocephala* in farmlands, Indian farmers not only generate additional income but also contribute silently to climate mitigation goals. Moreover, agroforestry reduces pressure on natural forests by supplying timber, fodder, and fuelwood directly from agricultural landscapes, preventing deforestation and its associated emissions.

Agroforestry also plays a vital role in climate adaptation. In the arid and semi-arid regions of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Bundelkhand, trees such as khejri, neem, and acacia help farmers withstand droughts by providing shade, fodder, and non-timber products even when crops fail. In flood-prone areas of Assam and Bihar, trees grown on raised bunds protect soil from erosion and reduce crop losses caused by inundation. Similarly, in the Himalayan states, integration of horticultural species like apple, walnut, or peach with cereals and vegetables provides stability to farm income in areas prone to temperature fluctuations and erratic snowfall. By moderating microclimates, conserving soil moisture, and diversifying farm outputs, agroforestry acts as a safety net for rural households exposed to climate shocks.

Water stress is one of the most serious consequences of climate change in India, and agroforestry offers natural solutions to this challenge. Deep-rooted trees improve groundwater recharge and prevent surface runoff, while leaf litter enhances soil organic matter and increases its capacity to hold water. Systems like agri-horticulture, where crops are cultivated between fruit trees, or silvi-pastoral practices, where fodder grasses are grown under scattered trees, significantly improve water use efficiency. In regions where rain-fed

farming dominates, such as central and eastern India, agroforestry ensures that soils retain more moisture, thereby supporting crops during dry spells.

Biodiversity conservation is another dimension where agroforestry proves its worth. Farmlands dominated by monocultures offer little space for pollinators, birds, or beneficial insects. By contrast, agroforestry landscapes mimic natural ecosystems and provide habitats for a wide range of species. In India's diverse ecological zones from the Thar desert to the Western Ghats, trees in agricultural lands create biological corridors that support local flora and fauna. This biodiversity not only enriches the environment but also contributes to ecological functions such as pollination, pest regulation, and nutrient cycling, which are essential for sustainable agriculture.

Agroforestry also directly contributes to livelihood security. Indian farmers face uncertainties of market prices, crop failures, and weather extremes. The integration of trees ensures multiple income streams, timber, fruits, fodder, resins, gums, medicinal products, and fuelwood that provide resilience against these uncertainties. For example, farmers in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana earn significant income from poplar and eucalyptus plantations integrated with wheat and paddy. In tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, species like mahua, tamarind, and aonla support household nutrition and income, especially for women and marginalized groups. By reducing dependence on a single crop, agroforestry provides both economic stability and nutritional diversity to rural families.

Another crucial contribution of agroforestry in India is soil health improvement. Continuous use of chemical fertilizers and intensive tillage in conventional agriculture has degraded soils in many regions. Agroforestry reverses this trend by adding organic matter through leaf litter, enhancing soil microbial activity, and reducing erosion. Nitrogen-fixing trees improve soil fertility naturally, decreasing the need for synthetic inputs. This not only cuts costs for farmers but also reduces environmental pollution. Over time, soils under agroforestry systems show higher organic carbon, better structure, and improved water retention, which directly translates into higher and more stable crop yields.

At the policy level, India has recognized the potential of agroforestry as a climate-smart strategy. The National Agroforestry Policy of 2014 was the first of its kind in the world, aiming to expand tree cover outside forests, streamline regulations on tree felling and transit, and link farmers to markets for tree-based products. Agroforestry has also been integrated into schemes such as the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture, the Green India Mission, and several state-level afforestation and watershed programs. These policy measures reflect the country's commitment to harness agroforestry for meeting climate goals, restoring degraded lands, and improving rural livelihoods.

Agroforestry's role becomes even more critical in the light of India's commitments under the Paris Agreement and its own ambitious targets of achieving net zero emissions by 2070. With vast areas of degraded and rain-fed land, India has immense potential to expand agroforestry practices. Scaling up agroforestry could help sequester large amounts of carbon, restore soil fertility, and ensure sustainable food production for a growing population. The integration of modern research with traditional knowledge, coupled with supportive institutions and market linkages, will be essential for realizing this potential.

In conclusion, agroforestry in India is not just an agricultural practice it is a holistic nature-based solution to the rising impacts of climate change. It provides a unique blend of ecological resilience, livelihood security, and climate-smart resource management. By absorbing carbon, protecting soils, conserving water, supporting biodiversity, and diversifying incomes, agroforestry addresses both mitigation and adaptation dimensions of climate change. More importantly, it strengthens the socio-ecological fabric of rural India, ensuring that small and marginal farmers are not left behind in the climate transition. As climate change intensifies, the need for scaling up agroforestry across India's diverse agro-ecological zones becomes not only an option but an imperative step toward building a sustainable and resilient future.

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